

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

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INFO AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

AMEMBASSY CARACAS

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

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SUBJECT: TREATY PLEBISCITE: FINAL RETURNS AND ANALYSIS

SUMMARY: FOLLOWING A HOTLY CONSTESTED CAMPAIGN, THE CANAL TREATIES WERE APPROVED BY A TWO-TO-ONE MARGIN IN A NATIONAL PLEBISCITE OCTOBER 23. THE COUNTRY WAS BLANKETED THAT DAY WITH FOREIGN AND LOCAL POLL-WATCHERS, AND BOTH THE VOTE AND THE COUNT SEEM TO HAVE BEEN EMINENTLY FAIR. THE RATIO OF YES AND NO VOTES WAS SURPRISINGLY UNIFORM THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. INTERPRETATION OF THE VOTE IS DIFFICULT BECAUSE MANY WHO VOTED NO WERE CASTING THEIR BALLOTS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT RATHER THAN AGAINST THE TREATIES. MOST PRIVATE FORECASTS BEFORE THE PLEBISCITE HAD THE PERCENTAGE OF YES VOTES SOMEWHAT HIGHER THAN THE ACTUAL RESULT. BUT FROM OUR LIMITED DISCUSSIONS WITH TREATY SUPPORTERS, THEY ARE SATISFIED--THOUGH HRDLY EXHILARATED--BY THE OUTCOME.

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THE OPPOSITION IS VERY PLEASED WITH ITS THIRD OF THE VOTE AND HOPES THAT THE POLITICAL FREEDOMS WHICH BLOSSOMED DURING THE CAMPAIGN WILL CONTINUE AND PERHAPS LEAD TO OFFICIAL TOLERANCE OF A LOYAL OPPOSITION. END SUMMARY.

1. THE ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL ON OCTOBER 28 RELEASED THE

FINAL OFFICIAL RESULTS OF THE PLEBISCITE WHICH WAS HELD OCTOBER 23. IT WAS 506,805 IN FAVOR OF THE TREATIES, 245,117 AGAINST, WITH 14,310 BALLOTS THROWN OUT. IN PERCENTAGES: 66.1 PERCENT YES; 32.0 PERCENT NO; 1.9 PERCENT VOID. IF THE SPOILED BALLOTS ARE REMOVED FROM THE CALCULATION, THE VOTE WAS 76.4 PERCENT IN FAVOR, 32.6 PERCENT AGAINST. THOUGH THERE WAS NO CAMPAIGN FOR SPOILING BALLOTS OR VOTING IN BLANK AS A GESTURE OF PROTEST, SOME VOTERS MAY HAVE ADOPTED THAT MEANS OF EXPRESSION. OTHERS MAY HAVE BEEN INADVERTENT MISTAKES.

2. THE TURNOUT WAS EXTREMELY HIGH. THOUGH THE VOTE WAS NOT OBLIGATORY, NEARLY 95 PERCENT OF ALL ELIGIBLE VOTERS EXERCISED THEIR FRANCHISE. WHEN ONE CONSIDERS THAT THIS IS THE RAINIEST TIME OF THE YEAR AND THAT MANY ELIGIBLE VOTERS WERE OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY, ILL OR OTHERWISE UNABLE TO GO TO THE POLLS, THE TURNOUT WAS INDEED IMPRESSIVE. IN THE MOST RECENT NATIONWIDE ELECTIONS, FOR CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVES IN 1972, THE TURNOUT WAS LESS THAN 90 PERCENT. NEARLY ALL THE FOREIGN OBSERVERS OF THE VOTE WITH WHOM WE HAVE SPOKEN HAVE REMARKED ON THE INTENSE INTEREST OF CITIZENRY IN VOTING, WATCHING THE COUNT, ETC. (IT MIGHT BE ADDED THAT THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE OFFICIAL ENCOURAGEMENT FOR CITIZENS TO FULFILL THEIR CIVIC "DUTY".)
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3. THE VOTING AND THE COUNT WERE IMPARTIAL. THERE WERE ANOLMALIES; THE UN AND OTHER FOREIGN OBSERVERS POINTED OUT SOME OF THEM AND HAD THEM CORRECTED; THE OPPOSITION HAS--WITH CONSIDERABLE ECLAT--POINTED OUT A FEW MORE TO THE FOREIGN PRESS. BUT THIS WAS A VERY CLOSELY INSPECTED ELECTION, AND NOTHING GREATER THAN THE ISOLATED--GENERALLY MINOR--IRREGULARITY HAS COME TO OUR ATTENTION.

4. THE PLEBISICITE IS PERHAPS SOMEWHAT MORE VULNERABLE ON THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION DURING THE CAMPAIGN THAN ON THE MECHANICS OF THE VOTE. BUT IN OUR VIEW, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSSION WAS REMARKABLY EVIDENT IN THE PRE-PLEBISCITE PERIOD. THE PARTIES, WHICH ARE TECHNICALLY ILLEGAL, HELD PUBLIC MEETINGS AND HAD THEM REPORTED ON THE FRONT PAGES. THE GOVERNMENT GRANTED TELEVISION TIME AND A DAILY PAGE IN THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MORINING PAPERS, GRATIS, TO ULTRA-LEFT STUDENTS WHO OPPOSED THE TEATY. THE INDEPENDENT LAWYERS MOVEMENT, WHICH SPEARHEADED THE OPPOSITION, OBTAINED PRIME TIME ON TELEVISION AND DISSEMINATED ITS VIEWS ON RADIO, IN

THE PRESS AND IN PUBLIC MEETINGS. STUDENTS HELD PUBLIC RALLIES AND MARCHES UNMOLESTED. IN FACT, DURING LATE SEPTEMBER AND EARLY OCTOBER THERE WAS MORE ANTI-THAN PRO-TREATY MATERIAL IN THE MEDIA.

5. THE GOVERNMENT TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ITS INCUMBENCY AND POWER. CERTAINLY IT DID ALL IT COULD TO INDOCTRINATE CIVIL SERVANTS IN THE TREATIES' VIRTUES. THE FINANCING OF THE PRO-TREATY CAMPAIGN REMAINS OBSCURE. AND DURING THE LAST WEEK OR SO OF THE CAMPAIGN THE OPPOSITION FOUND IT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO GET ITS VIEWS INTO THE PAPERS, THOUGH TV AND PARTICULARLY RADIO CONTINUED TO GIVE TIME TO TREATY OPPONENTS. DESPITE SUCH FLAWS, THIS PLEBISCITE CAMPAIGN GAVE PANAMANINAS UNCLASSIFIED

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A FREER OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS MAJOR NATIONAL ISSUES THAN THEY HAD HAD FOR NEARLY A DECADE.

6. PANAMANIANIS DID NOT LIMIT THEMSELVES TO DISCUSSING THE TREATIES. THERE WERE SLASHING (AND LIBELOUS) ATTACKS ON TORRIJOS. THE LEGITIMACY OF HIS REGIME WAS QUESTIONED. IT WAS CHARGED THAT THE GOVERNMENT VOLATES HUMAN RIGHTS, THAT IT IS A TOOL OF THE UNITED STATES, THAT IT IS A REPRESSIVE DICTATORSHIP. TORRIJOS WAS SHRILLY COUNSELED TO PERMIT THE RETURN OF EXILES, TO ALLOW THE POLITICAL PARTIES TO ACT FEELY, TO ALLOW COMPLETE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, AND SO FORTH.

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7. THIS UNACCUSTOMED ABILITY TO SPEAK OUT PUBLICLY ON ANY AND ALL ISSUES WHETTED THE APPETITE OF THE POLITICALLY INCLINED, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT. TRADITIONAL POLITICIANS ARE NOW LAYING PLANS TO TRY TO KEEP AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE OF THE FREEDOM WHICH THEY GAINED DURING THE CAMPAIGN. THEY HOPE, FOR EXAMPLE, TO BE ABLE TO RUN CANDIDATES IN THE 1978 ELECTION FOR THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES.

8. WHILE THE OPPOSITION RELIED HEAVILY ON THE MEDIA TO GET THEIR MESSAGE ACROSS, THE GOVERNMENT CONCENTRATED ON MEETINGS OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES AND OTHER SPECIAL GROUPS DURING MUCH OF THE CAMPAIGN. THEN IN THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS IT STEPPED UP ITS TELEVISION, RADIO AND PRESS CAMPAIGN. TORRIJOS WAS OUT OF THE COUNTRY FOR THREE WEEKS AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CAMPAIGN, RETURNING ONLY A WEEK BEFORE THE VOTE. THUS THE BURDEN OF UNCLASSIFIED

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SELLING THE TREATIES FELL UPON VICE PRESIDENT GERARDO GONZALEZ, THE TREATY NEGOTIATORS AND LARGE NUMBERS OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES WHO WERE CHARGED WITH EXPLAINING THE TREATIES. THEY GENERALLY AVOIDED PAINTING THE TREATIES AS A TRIUMPH FOR PANAMA. RATHER THEY ADMITTED THE TREATIES WERE FAR FROM PERFECT FROM PANAMA'S STANDPOINT BUT SAID THEY WERE A VAST IMPROVEMENT OVER THE STATUS QUO. TORRIJOS, AFTER RETURNING TO PANAMA, MADE SEVERAL SPEECHES IN FAVOR OF THE TREATIES. THE MOST IMPORTANT WAS A PRIME-TIME TELEVISION BROADCAST OCTOBER 20.

9. PRO-TREATY FORCES GOT UNEXPECTED HELP WHEN LIBERAL PARTY PRESIDENT DAVID SAMUDIO WENT ON TV TO ANNOUNCE HIS PARTY'S DECISION TO SUPPORT THE TREATIES. HE ALSO TOOK THE OCCASION TO CRITICIZE THE GOVERNMENT. THE OTHER PRINCIPAL PARTY, ARNULFO ARIAS' PANAMENISTA PARTY, APPARENTLY WAS UNABLE TO GET ITS DUCKS LINED UP. ARIAS, STILL FONDLY REMEMBERED BY MANY PANAMANIAN, CALLED FROM HIS MIAMI EXILE FOR A NO VOTE--NEWS WHICH WAS BANNERED IN THE PAPERS. ON THE OTHER HAND, A PANAMENISTA YOUTH GROUP CAME OUT FOR THE TREATIES.

THE SMALLER PARTIES WERE ALL OVER THE LOT. THE COMMUNISTS SUPPORTED THE TREATIES; THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS WAFFLED; THE REPUBLICANS APPEAR TO HAVE SAID NOTHING; THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS FROM VENEZUELAN EXILE, ZAPPED THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TREATIES.

10. STUDENT GROUPS WERE AMONG THE MOST CONSPICUOUS PROTAGONISTS OF THE CAMPAIGN, THE WALLS OF PANAMA CITY AND THE COUNTRY'S OTHER TOWNS WILL BEAR WITNESS FOR A LONG TIME TO THEIR ENTHUSIASM. THERE IS HARDLY A FLAT PLACE TO BE SEEN WHICH DOES NOT HAVE ITS "SI", CORRECTED TO "NO", RECORRECTED TO "SI" BY PERIPATETIC UNCLASSIFIED

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SPRAY-CAN ARTISTS. THE MOST RADICAL STUDENT GROUPS-- THE REVOLUTINARY SOCIALIST LEAGUE (LSR), THE CIRCULO CAMILO TORRES, THE GUAYKUCHOS, THE REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT FRONT (FER) VANGUARDIA POPULAR, ETC.--OPPOSED THE TREATY. THE MOST VOCAL STUDENT POLITICOS WERE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA LAW SCHOOL, BUT THERE WAS PLENTY OF SUPPORT FROM HIGH SCHOOLS AND THE REST OF THE UNIVERSITY. MOST STUDENT SUPPORT FOR THE TREATIES CAME FROM THE PANAMANIAN STUDENT FEDERATION (FEP)-- WHICH HAS CLOSE TIES WITH THE GOVERNMENT--AND FROM STUDENT GROUPS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMMUNIST PARTY (PDP).

11. THE EXACT MEANING OF THE PLEBISCITE, IN DOMESTIC POLITICAL TERMS, IS UNKNOWABLE. WE HAVE THE VOTERS' ANSWERS--TWO-THIRDS YES, ONE-THIRD NO; BUT NOT EVERYONE WAS ANSWERING THE SAME QUESTION. A GOOD NUMBER OF VOTERS WERE SAYING NO TO "THE TORRIJOS DICTATORSHIP", OTHERS TO UNEMPLOYMENT OR THE HIGH COST OF LIVING. MANY--LIKE SAMUDIO--VOTED YES, BUT ON THE CLEAR UNDERSTANDING THAT HIS WAS NOT A PRO-TORRIJOS VOTE. OTHERS-- LIKE EX-FOREIGN MINISTER AQUILINO BOYD--VOTED YES DESPITE SERIOUS RESERVATIONS ABOUT CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE TREATIES. THUS, IT SEEMS FAIR TO SAY THAT ALL, OR VIRTUALLY ALL, OF THE AFFIRMATIVE VOTE WAS ANSWERING THE QUESTION, DO YOU PREFER THESE TREATIES TO THE ALTERNATIVE OR REJECTION? BUT MUCH OF THE NO VOTE WAS SAYING, THE TREATIES MAY BE GOOD, BAD OR INDIFFERENT, BUT I WANT TO SEND A MESSAGE ON ANOTHER SUBJECT.

12. MOST OF PANAMA'S POLITICAL CONGNOSCENTI WITH WHOM WE SPOKE PRIOR TO THE PLEBISCITE EXPECTED A RATHER MORE LOPSIDED VOTE IN FAVOR OF THE TREATIES. THE MEAN PRE-VOTE ESTIMATE SEEMED TO BE BETWEEN 70 AND 75 PERCENT PRO-TREATY. AFTERWARD, HOWEVER, BOTH GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION FIGURES SEEMED TO BE REASONABLY

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PLEASED WITH THE OUTCOME. SEVERAL PRO-TREATY PARTISANS HAVE TOLD US THAT A TWO-TO-ONE MARGIN IS QUITE OVERWHELMING IN A FREE VOTE ON ALMOST ANYTHING; AND THE FACT THAT IT WAS NOT MORE LOPSIDED SHOULD DEMONSTRATE TO PANAMA'S CRITICS IN THE U.S. THAT THE ELECTION WAS NOT FIXED AND THAT THE TREATY CAN HARDLY BE CALLED A GIVEAWAY IF SO MANY PANAMANIAN THINK IT IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

13. WE DO NOT YET HAVE A BREAKDOWN OF THE RETURNS BY BOX, BUT A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE PROVINCIAL RESULTS ITS PERHAPS SOMEWHAT INSTRUCTIVE. THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM BEFORE THE VOTE WAS THAT THE TREATIES WOULD WIN BY A LANDSLIDE IN THE BOONDOCKS, WHERE LACK OF INFORMATION AND TRADITIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD AUTHORITY WERE EXPECTED TO HELP THE GOVERNMENT. ON THE OTHER HAND, CHIRQUI, PANAMA AND COLON PROVINCES--MORE SOPHISTICATED AND BETTER INFORMED--WERE EXPECTED TO BE FAIRLY CLOSE.

14. TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, THIS PATTERN DID EMERGE; BUT IT WAS MUCH FAINTER THAN MOST EXPECTED. IN BOTH PANAMA AND CHIRQUI THE PRO-TREATY VOTE WAS JUST OVER 66 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL VALID VOTE--OR VERY SLIGHTLY LOWER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE. COLON'S YES VOTE WAS JUST OVER 60 PERCENT. TORRIJOS' NATIVE PROVINCE OF VERAGUAS WENT NEARLY 5-TO-1 IN FAVOR OF THE TREATY; BUT WHEN THE VALID VOTES OF THE THREE OTHER "TRADITIONAL" CENTRAL PROVINCES--HERRERA, LOS SANTOS AND COCLE--ARE ADDED TOGETHER, THE MARGIN IS ROUGHLY 69-31 IN FAVOR OF THE TREATIES FOR THE THREE. SO THE SO-CALLED "FEUDAL FACTOR" FAVORING THE GOVERNMENT WAS APPARENTLY INSIGNIFICANT. ECONOMIC FACTORS ARE EASIER TO DISCERN. COLON IS IN SEVERE ECONOMIC TROUBLE;

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UNEMPLOYMENT IS HIGH THERE. FURTHERMORE, MANY COLON RESIDENTS EITHER WORK IN THE ZONE OR HAVE RELATIVES WHO DO. THUS SOME NO VOTES WERE FOR THE STATUS QUO, PROBABLY MORE WERE PROTESTING ECONOMIC ILLS. THE "COMARCA" OF SAN BLAS WAS THE ONLY PROVINCE TO VOTE AGAINST THE TREATIES (4,149 TO 4,605). THIS IS A SPECIAL CASE. IT IS THE SERVICE OF THE CUNA INDIANS, A PROUD, LARGELY UNASSIMILATED TRIBE WHICH HAS LONG CHAFED UNDER PANAMANIAN AUTHORITY, AND WHICH HAS

DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS A SYMBIOTIC RELATINSHIP WITH THE U.S. MILITARY IN THE CANAL ZONE. THE RAISING OF AMERICAN FLAGS ON PLEBISCITE DAY ON ONE SAN BLAS ISLAND HAS LED TO SOME UGLY EXCHANGES IN THE PRESS.

IN SAN BLAS THE NEGATIVE VOTE WAS PARTLY ANTI-GOVERNMENT (OR RATHER ANTI-AUTHORITY), PARTLY ECONOMIC (MANY CUNAS WORK IN THE ZONE), AND PARTLY STRICTLY EMOTIONAL (MANY PROBABLY ASSUMED THAT TREATY APPROVAL WOULD MEAN THAT THE AMERICANS--WHO HAVE GENERALLY TREATED THEM WELL--WOULD GO HOME).

15. IN SUM, MANY OF THE NO VOTES WERE AIMED AT SENDING A MESSAGE, AND IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO SEE THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE. BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THAT THE PANAMANIAN PEOPLE HAVE UN-EQUIVOCALLY SAID NO TO THE STATUS QUO IN PANAMA'S RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.
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